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El Salvador: US Policy May 1989

Background: The Central American republic of El Salvador is a country of some 5.5 million inhabitants living in an area about the size of Massachusetts. It is the most densely populated country in the Western Hemisphere. Although its economy relies heavily on agricultural production, it lacks sufficient arable land to provide employment for its growing agricultural labor force.

In 1979 a reformist civilian-military coalition overthrew the government of General Humberto Romero, ending five decades of military rule. Amid intense political violence during 1980-83, first a civilian-military junta and then interim president Alvaro Magana began to implement political, economic, and social reforms. In March 1982, a Constituent Assembly was elected; it drafted a constitution that was enacted in December 1983. Christian Democrat Jose Napoleon Duarte was elected to a 5-year term as president in 1984. Voters returned to the polls in 1985 and 1988 to vote in Legislative Assembly and municipal elections and, in March 1989, elected Alfredo Cristiani of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) as president.

A Marxist-led insurgency, with Soviet, Cuban, and Nicaraguan support, still threatens the democratic consolidation in El Salvador. Under pressure from the better-trained and more professional Salvadoran Armed Forces, the guerrillas of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) have resorted increasingly to urban terrorism and attacks on the vulnerable economic infrastructure of the country; meanwhile, popular support for the guerrillas continues to wane. In January 1989, the FMLN offered to accept the results if the presidential election were postponed for 6 months. The government declared a unilateral 3-month cease-fire to facilitate negotiations; the FMLN, however, never addressed the basic issues of when it would stop its attacks against civilians and elected officials or when it would begin its demobilization, and it continued its campaign of violence and urban terrorism. The FMLN later broke off the dialogue. President-elect Cristiani has stated that when he takes office on June 1, he will attempt to renew the dialogue with the FMLN.

Central American Peace Agreement: El Salvador is a party to the several accords that the Central American countries have signed. Among them is the August 1987 Central American Peace Agreement that (1) called upon regional and outside governments to cease aiding insurgent movements in the region and to prevent their territory's use by insurgent forces; (2) required the participating governments to institute reforms promoting democracy; (3) offered amnesty to political prisoners; and (4) provided for negotiations on a cease-fire and a process of national reconciliation in the signatory countries undergoing civil conflict.

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US goals: US policy goals for Central America are based on the recommendations of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, known as the "Kissinger commission," which concluded in 1984 that economic and political instability, exacerbated by external subversion, was acute. With overwhelming bipartisan support, Congress has since passed legislation designed to implement the commission's recommendations. These included advancing the cause of democracy, improving economic conditions, promoting peaceful change, strengthening hemispheric cooperation, preventing hostile, antidemocratic forces from gaining a strategic foothold, and preventing the Soviet Union from increasing its influence in the region. The US Congress and the Administration emphasized the shared goals of achieving democracy and ending subversion on the isthmus when they issued a bipartisan statement for Central America on March 24.

Political development: US policy has promoted the consolidation of the democratic political process in El Salvador. With US encouragement and technical assistance, El Salvador has held six elections since 1982, all of which were closely scrutinized by hundreds of observers from around the world, including the press. These elections were uniformly judged to have been fair and honest. El Salvador will reach another milestone in its democratic evolution on June 1 when, for the first time in recent history, power is transferred peacefully from one democratically elected president to another.

Social development: A key component of US policy and programs has been the improvement of human rights observance. Under President Duarte's government, strengthened democratic institutions, civilian leadership, professional training, and human rights instruction have helped curb abuses by the armed and public security forces. Vice President Quayle, during his February visit to El Salvador, reiterated the importance the Administration places on continued improvement in the human rights area. A second important area of US concern is judicial reform, with the goal of a well-trained, independent judiciary free of intimidation, political influence, and corruption. Other US programs help the Salvadoran Government meet the population's housing, education, and health needs.

Economic development: US policy promotes economic recovery by helping the government restore growth and achieve financial stability. We promote economic development by engaging the private sector in ways to stimulate investment and by encouraging economic policy adjustments and export diversification. For the last 3 years, the Salvadoran economy has registered modest growth.

Military assistance: US military assistance, totaling about 20% of US aid to El Salvador, is designed to help the armed forces counter the guerrillas' threat to the democratically elected government so that political, social, and economic development can continue. Military assistance seeks to promote Salvadoran self-sufficiency and respect for human rights.

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